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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 000233

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, DRL/NESCA, G/IWI

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SUBJECT: WOMEN'S REFORM IN SAUDI ARABIA: NO CELEBRATIONS YET

REF: A. JEDDAH 0072

[1](#)B. JEDDAH 0079

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL JOHN KINCANNON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)
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[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The opening weeks of 2008 have brought a flurry of rumors and announcements regarding potentially important advances in the rights of Saudi Arabia's female citizens. On January 21, the English newspaper "Telegraph" reported that the SAG unofficially planned to drop the ban on women driving cars by year's end. On the same day, in other international media, it was announced that the Saudi Ministry of Commerce had decided to allow women to stay in hotels or furnished apartments without male guardians. An article in the "Arab News" on January 28 reported that a women's rights organization, Ansar Al-Marrah, ("The Partisans of Women") had finally been approved by the Ministry of Social Affairs after a two-year struggle to gain licensing. Finally, the SAG announced that it would create a nationwide network of women's sports centers in the Kingdom. Despite these positive developments, there is real skepticism amongst prominent activists in the Kingdom whether the changes announced have truly been implemented, or will be any time soon. Furthermore, criticism from powerful conservative elements of society has already begun to oppose these prospective changes. END SUMMARY.

Driving Ban

[1](#)2. (C) In a January 21 story in the British daily "Telegraph," an unnamed source inside the Saudi government claimed that the SAG planned to lift the ban on women driving by the end of this year. PolOff received information on February 8 from Ibrahim al-Mugaiteeb, a consultant to the Human Rights Commission, that a Royal Decree confirming this would be signed within the next three weeks. Many of post's female contacts in the Eastern Province (EP), including well-known human rights activist Wajeha al-Huwaider, are confident that the ban will indeed be lifted by year's end. Al-Huwaider has explained that the difference this time may be the fact that the issue has become practical and economic, as opposed to purely a matter of women's rights. Because of the rising cost of living in Saudi Arabia, women have been entering the work force in larger numbers, creating a much greater need for them to drive.

[1](#)3. (C) Prominent female leaders in the Western Province (WP), including National Society for Human Rights Vice President for the Mecca Region, Aljawhara Alanqari, and Executive Director of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry's (JCCI) Businesswomen's Center, Basma Omair, remain skeptical that women will receive the right to drive by year's end. They attribute the January 21 announcement to "hype," arguing that the SAG was focusing on other, more important women's

issues, such as combating domestic violence. Furthermore, in what may be a reaction to complaints from several prominent religious leaders, authorities already seem to be backsliding on this issue. For example, after establishing driver education programs for women in January, Saudi Aramco, the state-owned oil company based in Dhahran, sent a memo on February 4 to all of its employees announcing that the program was canceled due to "technical problems in developing a Contract for Driving Instructors." (NOTE: The men's driver education programs have continued. END NOTE.)

Male Guardianship

¶4. (C) As per a January 21 advisory sent to hotels by the SAG, hotels across the Kingdom are now allowed to register female guests without a male guardian (mehram) accompanying them. As a condition to stay overnight alone, all female guests are required to have national identification, and the hotels are expected to notify local police when women check-in. Post has heard, though not confirmed, that this restriction has not yet been lifted in the EP. Some hotels are reportedly still waiting for "official word" to make the change in their check-in procedures. In the Western Province, implementation appears mixed. Some Arabic daily press reports have stated that several hotels in Jeddah are permitting women to check-in alone, while others have cited specific expulsions. (NOTE: According to some Consulate Jeddah contacts- and consistent with the Hejaz's more "liberal" reputation- prior to the advisory, some hotels in the WP had already been permitting women to stay alone. END NOTE.)

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¶5. (U) There is notable criticism from conservatives vis--vis this issue as well. In his response to a recent report released by the U.N. Human Rights Committee on women's rights in Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bin Abdullah Aal al-Sheikh, Grand Mufti and Head of the Senior Ulemas Authority, announced that "those who demand that women be allowed to travel without a chaperone...are only seeking promiscuity and corruption and spreading indecency in society."

Civil Society

¶6. (C) Suliman Al-Salman, founder of Ansar Al-Marah, a Riyadh-based civil society organization focused on women's rights (and comprised of men and women from both the Shiite and Sunni communities) told "Arab News" on January 28 that "after two years of negotiations with the Ministry of Social Affairs, a request to establish Ansar Al-Marah (had been) initially approved." He further explained that the Shura Council's recent approval of the establishment of a National Authority for Civil Society Organizations would speed up the process of obtaining a license for his group to operate. However, well-known women's rights activists Fatin Bundagji, former Director of the JCCI's Women's Empowerment and Research Department, and Fawzia Al Ayouni told PolOff on February 12 that they doubted al-Salman had received SAG permission to establish his group. They argued that many groups have been on a waitlist to receive licenses for three to four years, and did not believe that the SAG had any reason to treat al-Salman's organization differently.

Women and Sport

¶7. (C) International pressure, along with concerns that the lack of opportunity for girls to participate in athletics has contributed to obesity and health problems, is forcing the

SAG to reexamine its policy with respect to female sport in the Kingdom. According to local press reports, the government will soon build female sports clubs in Riyadh, Dammam, Jeddah and Buraydah, with other locations to follow. It is rumored that this initiative may have been the result of a threat by the International Olympic Committee to freeze the membership of countries that have failed to establish women's sports facilities (which would exclude Saudi Arabia from all future Olympic Games). On January 25, Al-Sahat website reported that Mohammad bin Fahd, Governor of the Eastern Province, had reprimanded Prince Mohammed bin Fahd Private University's director, Issa Al-Ansari, for organizing women's football matches on campus. The action apparently came after conservative's criticized the matches. When contacted by post, authorities at the university denied the incident.

Starbuck's Arrest

18. (C) According to a February 10 "Arab News" story, The National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), Saudi Arabia's "non-governmental" human rights body, has agreed to address the Governate of Riyadh regarding Yara Anabtawi, the American-Saudi businesswoman who was arrested for allegedly being in seclusion with an unrelated man at a Riyadh Starbuck's (reftel A). In the article, a NSHR official described the manner in which Yara was strip-searched in prison as "inhuman," adding that NSHR "would urge the Governate of Riyadh to drop all fingerprinted confession papers from Yara's public file, and ask that Yara be compensated for the damages she sustained." Ms. Anabtawi told PolOff on February 10 that she had low expectations regarding legal recourse, adding that she only anticipated that the Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice would clear her record (reftel B).

19. (C) COMMENT: Recent efforts by the SAG to loosen restrictions on women may be part of the King's strategy of incremental reform, allowing people sufficient time to get used to change, years before it is implemented. Mohammad al-Zulfa, a reformist Shura Council member, explained in the "Telegraph" that when the lifting of the driving ban was first proposed, "the extremists were really mad." He added that "now they just complain." "It is diminishing into a form of consent," he noted. That said, the conservative element has already slowed the progress of late January. It is also unlikely that the government will take steps in the near future to address women's issues that are more difficult to sell to conservatives. For example, issues of marriage,

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property, child care, or protection from violence. Relative to rights at hotels, or the ability to participate in sports clubs, it is the addressing of these issues that would most improve the lives of Saudi women. END COMMENT.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
GFOELLER